

UNH ADVANCE

INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

An NSF funded program to improve the climate for UNH faculty through fair and equitable policies, practices and leadership development.

Making the Invisible Visible: Gender Microaggressions

Imagine these scenarios:

You are a member of a faculty search committee hiring an assistant professor in biology. The committee is just starting a face-to-face interview with a candidate named Maria Vasquez. She has dark hair, dark eyes, and a tan complexion. Most committee members assume Dr. Vasquez is Latina. One of your colleagues asks an ice-breaking question, "Where are you from?" Dr. Vasquez responds, "Minneapolis." Your colleague follows-up with, "No, I mean, where do you come from originally?" Dr. Vasquez frowns. "Minneapolis," she repeats with an edge to her voice.

A search committee hiring a department chair in environmental science is meeting to discuss the final list of candidates, which includes two men and one woman. During the discussion, a male committee member says, "I think we should hire one of the men. I won't work for a woman."

Your computer information systems department is hiring a new assistant professor. When committee members are introducing themselves during an on-campus interview with a female candidate, the candidate notices that a female

committee member frequently looks at her chest, which makes the candidate very uncomfortable. The committee member seems unaware of her behavior.

During a meeting of the faculty search committee on which you are serving, almost every time a female colleague tries to speak, she is interrupted by a male colleague. No one says anything when this happens. Finally, your female colleague stops trying to offer contributions to the discussion. You wonder what she wanted to say.

An African American man named Alex is a candidate for a tenure-track job in chemistry. During his on-campus interview, the chairperson of the search committee is giving him a tour. As they walk through the department labs, the chairperson makes a point of saying, "We treat everyone equally here. It doesn't matter who you are or where you come from. We are all the same." Alex smiles politely and crosses his arms.

Why are these comments and behaviors problematic?

These are examples of "microaggressions."

Defining Microaggressions

Microaggressions:

- are verbal and nonverbal behaviors
- communicate negative, hostile, and derogatory messages to people rooted in their marginalized group membership (based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.)
- occur in everyday interactions
- can be intentional or unintentional
- are often unacknowledged

Three Forms of Microaggressions:

1. **microassaults:** "old fashioned" discrimination
 - name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions
 - likely to be conscious and deliberate
2. **microinsults:** subtle snubs that communicate a covert insulting message
 - convey stereotypes, rudeness, and insensitivity that demean a person's identity
 - are frequently unknown to the person

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3. microinvalidations: disconfirming messages
 - exclude, negate, or dismiss the thoughts, feelings, or experiences of certain groups
 - may be most damaging form of the three microaggressions

Types of Gender Microaggressions

1. Sexual objectification
2. Second-class citizenship
3. Use of sexist language
4. Assumption of inferiority
5. Restrictive gender roles
6. Denial of the reality of sexism
7. Denial of individual sexism
8. Invisibility
9. Sexist humor/jokes
10. Environmental invalidations: macrolevel aggressions that happen on systemic and environmental level (unequal pay; glass ceiling; media images)

Microaggressions can also be based on membership in other marginalized groups based on race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, religion, etc.

Detrimental Impact of Gender Microaggressions

1. Negative impact on standard of living
 - Unequal wages
 - Higher levels of poverty
2. Negative impact on physical health
 - Migraines, heart disease, autoimmune disorders
3. Negative impact on psychological health
 - Depression
 - Anxiety
 - Body image dissatisfaction and eating disorders

Moving Forward: How to Overcome Microaggressions

1. Individual Intervention
 - Develop an honest awareness of our own biases, prejudices, and stereotypes
 - Become an ally and activist
2. Organizational Intervention
 - Make sure policies, practices, and procedures allow for equal access and opportunity
 - Create a welcoming communication climate
 - Provide professional development opportunities
 - Make accountability central
3. Societal/Cultural Intervention
 - Critically assess cultural communication (education, mass media, institutions, etc.)
 - Create social policy and law to rectify discrimination and promote equal access
 - Promote multi-cultural education

The Challenges of Responding to Microaggressions

Dilemma #1: The Invisibility of Unintentional Expressions of Bias

- tend to be subtle, indirect, and unintentional
- occurs when other rationales for prejudicial behavior can be offered

Dilemma #2: Perceived Minimal Harm of Microaggressions

- when people say things like "Just let it go," "You are overreacting," or "It's not a big deal"
- the cumulative effect of microaggressions can be more problematic and detrimental than overt acts of prejudice

Dilemma #3: The Catch-22 of Responding to Microaggressions

- "damned if you do and damned if you don't"
- challenges faced by the victim:
 1. determining that a microaggression has actually occurred
 2. figuring out how to react
 - not responding may have detrimental effects
 3. responding with anger and striking back
 - will likely engender negative consequences

Where should you go at UNH to report microaggressive behavior?

Faculty should report incidents to their department chair and staff should report to their supervisors. Faculty and staff can also report discriminatory behavior to Donna Marie Sorrentino, Director of Affirmative Action and Equity, at affirmaction.equity@unh.edu.

UNH policy and processes for handling complaints resulting from discrimination are available on-line at the UNH Affirmative Action and Equity Office website at: <http://unh.edu/affirmativeaction/policies.html>

A Sampling of References

Capodilupo, C.M., Nadal, K.L., Corman, L., Hamit, S., Lyons, Q.B., & Weinberg, A. (2010). In D.W. Sue (Ed.), *Microaggressions and marginality: Manifestations, dynamics, and impact* (pp. 193-216). New York: John Wiley and Sons; Nadal, K.L. (2010). *Gender microaggressions and women: Implications for mental health*. In M.A. Paludi (Ed.), *Feminism and women's rights worldwide: Vol. 2. Mental and physical health* (pp. 155-175). Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger; Sue, D.W. (2010a). *Microaggressions in everyday life*. New York: John Wiley and Sons; and Sue, D.W. (2010b). *Microaggressions and marginality: Manifestations, dynamics, and impact*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Internet Resources

1. The Microaggressions Project: people post examples of microaggressions in their everyday lives <http://www.microaggressions.com/>
2. U-Tube Video: Derald Wing Sue explaining microaggressions <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJL2P0JsAS4>
3. U-Tube video: Derald Wing Sue, invited lecture on microaggressions at the 2012 American Psychological Association Conference in Orlando FL <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sW3tFpTHzI>
4. "What kind of Asian are you?" U-Tube video parody <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWynJkN5HbQ>

Tool: Recognizing Microaggressions and the Messages They Send

Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership (*from Diversity in the Classroom, UCLA Diversity & Faculty Development, 2014*). **The first step in addressing microaggressions is to recognize when a microaggression has occurred and what message it may be sending. The context of the relationship and situation is critical.** Below are common themes to which microaggressions attach.

THEMES	MICROAGGRESSION EXAMPLES	MESSAGE
Alien in One's Own Land When Asian Americans, Latino Americans and others who look different or are named differently from the dominant culture are assumed to be foreign-born	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Where are you from or where were you born?" "You speak English very well." "What are you? You're so interesting looking!" A person asking an Asian American or Latino American to teach them words in their native language. Continuing to mispronounce the names of students after students have corrected the person time and time again. Not willing to listen closely and learn the pronunciation of a non-English based name. 	You are not a true American. You are a perpetual foreigner in your own country. Your ethnic/racial identity makes you exotic.
Ascription of Intelligence Assigning intelligence to a person of color or a woman based on his/her race/gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "You are a credit to your race." "Wow! How did you become so good in math?" To an Asian person, "You must be good in math, can you help me with this problem?" To a woman of color: "I would have never guessed that you were a scientist." 	People of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites. All Asians are intelligent and good in math/science. It is unusual for a woman to have strong mathematical skills.
Color Blindness Statements that indicate that a White person does not want to or need to acknowledge race.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "When I look at you, I don't see color." "There is only one race, the human race." "America is a melting pot." "I don't believe in race." Denying the experiences of students by questioning the credibility /validity of their stories. 	Assimilate to the dominant culture. Denying the significance of a person of color's racial/ethnic experience and history. Denying the individual as a racial/cultural being.
Criminality/Assumption of Criminal Status A person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant based on his/her race.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A White man or woman clutches his/her purse or checks wallet as a Black or Latino person approaches. A store owner following a customer of color around the store. Someone crosses to the other side of the street to avoid a person of color. While walking through the halls of the Chemistry building, a professor approaches a post-doctoral student of color to ask if she/he is lost, making the assumption that the person is trying to break into one of the labs. 	You are a criminal. You are going to steal/you are poor, you do not belong. You are dangerous.
Denial of Individual Racism/Sexism/Heterosexism A statement made when bias is denied.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "I'm not racist. I have several Black friends." "As a woman, I know what you go through as a racial minority." To a person of color: "Are you sure you were being followed in the store? I can't believe it." 	I could never be racist because I have friends of color. Your racial oppression is no different than my gender oppression. I can't be a racist. I'm like you. Denying the personal experience of individuals who experience bias.
Myth of Meritocracy Statements which assert that race or gender does not play a role in life successes, for example in issues like faculty demographics.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "I believe the most qualified person should get the job." "Of course he'll get tenure, even though he hasn't published much—he's Black!" "Men and women have equal opportunities for achievement." "Gender plays no part in who we hire." "America is the land of opportunity." "Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough." "Affirmative action is racist." 	People of color are given extra unfair benefits because of their race. The playing field is even so if women cannot make it, the problem is with them. People of color are lazy and/or incompetent and need to work harder.

Adapted from Sue, Derald Wing, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender and Sexual Orientation*, Wiley & Sons, 2010.

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THEMES	MICROAGGRESSION	MESSAGE
Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles The notion that the values and communication styles of the dominant/White culture are ideal/"normal".	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To an Asian, Latino or Native American: <i>"Why are you so quiet? We want to know what you think. Be more verbal."</i> <i>"Speak up more."</i> Asking a Black person: <i>"Why do you have to be so loud/animated? Just calm down."</i> <i>"Why are you always angry?"</i> anytime race is brought up in the classroom discussion. Dismissing an individual who brings up race/culture in work/school setting. 	Assimilate to dominant culture. Leave your cultural baggage outside. There is no room for difference.
Second-Class Citizen Occurs when a target group member receives differential treatment from the power group; for example, being given preferential treatment as a consumer over a person of color.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Faculty of color mistaken for a service worker. Not wanting to sit by someone because of his/her color. Female doctor mistaken for a nurse. Being ignored at a store counter as attention is given to the White customer. Saying <i>"You people..."</i> An advisor assigns a Black post-doctoral student to escort a visiting scientist of the same race even though there are other non-Black scientists in this person's specific area of research. An advisor sends an email to another work colleague describing another individual as a "good Black scientist." Raising your voice or speaking slowly when addressing a blind student. In class, an instructor tends to call on male students more frequently than female ones. 	People of color are servants to Whites. They couldn't possibly occupy high status positions. Women occupy nurturing positions. Whites are more valued customers than people of color. You don't belong. You are a lesser being. A person with a disability is defined as lesser in all aspects of physical and mental functioning. The contributions of female students are less worthy than the contributions of male students.
Sexist/Heterosexist Language Terms that exclude or degrade women and LGBT persons.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of the pronoun "he" to refer to all people. Being constantly reminded by a coworker that <i>"we are only women."</i> Being forced to choose Male or Female when completing basic forms. Two options for relationship status: married or single. A heterosexual man who often hangs out with his female friends more than his male friends is labeled as gay. 	Male experience is universal. Female experience is invisible. LGBT categories are not recognized. LGBT partnerships are invisible. Men who do not fit male stereotypes are inferior.
Traditional Gender Role Prejudicing and Stereotyping Occurs when expectations of traditional roles or stereotypes are conveyed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When a female student asks a male professor for extra help on an engineering assignment, he asks <i>"What do you need to work on this for anyway?"</i> <i>"You're a girl, you don't have to be good at math."</i> A person asks a woman her age and, upon hearing she is 31, looks quickly at her ring finger. An advisor asks a female student if she is planning on having children while in postdoctoral training. Shows surprise when a feminine woman turns out to be a lesbian. Labeling an assertive female committee chair/dean as a "b____," while describing a male counterpart as a "forceful leader." 	Women are less capable in math and science. Women should be married during child-bearing ages because that is their primary purpose. Women are out of line when they are aggressive.